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Why are young Australian unis punching above their weight?

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Why are young Australian unis punching above their weight?

Abstract

The latest Times Higher Education rankings of universities under 50 years old paints a positive picture for the Australian higher education sector. Of the Top 100 Under 50, Australia has more high-ranking universities (16) than any other country. What is it about the Australian higher education system that allows new universities to flourish more so than in the US or UK? What does the THE Top 100 Under 50 result say about our "need" for reform in the higher education sector? To put this result into perspective, the UK, with nearly triple our population (64 million) and well over triple the number of universities (162), had 15 listed in the Top 100 Under 50. The United States, with a population of 320 million and over 4,700 degree-granting public and private universities, liberal arts and community colleges, could only manage seven in the Top 100 Under 50. Admittedly, none of Australia's 16 are in that list's top 20. UTS came closest (21st). Higher honours instead go to universities across a host of countries including Switzerland, Korea, Germany, France, Turkey, the Netherlands, the UK and US. Nevertheless, with 16 in the Top 100 Under 50, the Australian picture is arresting: of consistent, strong overall standards beyond the country's older universities, of high quality across many young institutions - not just a couple of standout cases, as is typical for most other countries on the list. Given that, comparatively, Australia grossly under-invests in higher education as a percentage of GDP, the result is all the more remarkable. We haven't bought our way to success. What, then, are the factors that allow our young universities to perform so well?

Keywords

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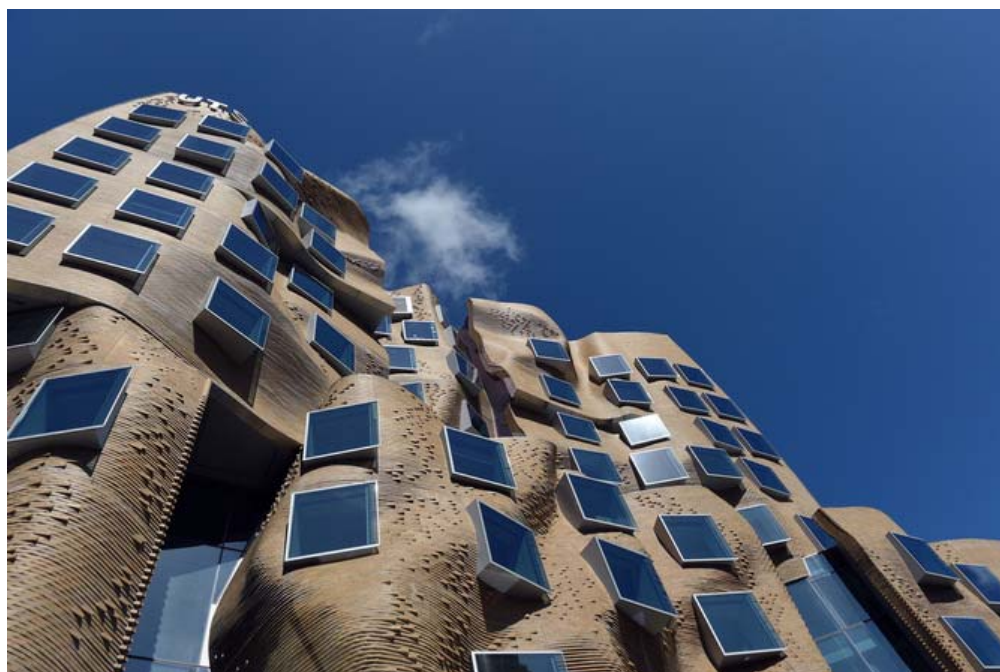
THE CONVERSATION

Why are young Australian unis punching above their weight?

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Australia has more universities under 50 years old in the top 100 than any other country. Frank Gehry Building, UTS From AAP

The latest Times Higher Education rankings of universities under 50 years old paints a positive picture for the Australian higher education sector.

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Nevertheless, with 16 in the Top 100 Under 50, the Australian picture is arresting: of consistent, strong overall standards beyond the country's older universities, of high quality across many young institutions – not just a couple of standout cases, as is typical for most other countries on the list.

Given that, comparatively, Australia grossly under-invests in higher education as a percentage of GDP, the result is all the more remarkable. We haven't bought our way to success. What, then, are the factors that allow our young universities to perform so well?

Geography and population structure

Unlike several other countries represented that have only a couple of outstanding young universities, Australian has a very dispersed population, long distances between cities and in between universities, and suburban catchment areas that generate a strong base for both metropolitan and regional universities.

This is a breeding ground for replication and consistency rather than concentration. Australia's entrants in the Top 100 Under 50 come from wide and far with representatives from state capital cities (UTS, QUT, RMIT, UniSA, Flinders, Murdoch), the regions (Newcastle, Wollongong, Deakin, CDU) and also relative newcomers (RMIT, Swinburne, Edith Cowan).

Cultural factors

English language provides a massive cultural advantage over the French, German or Asian counterparts, comparatively enhancing our international activity and research publishing success.

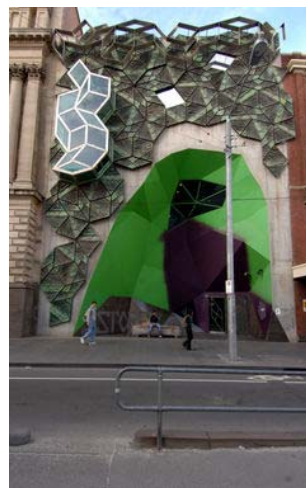
Australian researchers across the board also tend to be outward-looking and collaborative internationally – out of necessity given distance and limited critical mass.

Australian universities are also arguably less burdened by hierarchical thinking, or dependent on inherited wealth or private benefactors that perpetuate elite privilege in countries such as the UK and US.

It would be naïve to assume that the Australian higher education system is somehow a classless utopia of equal opportunity. Regional and socioeconomic disadvantages do exist.

Yet in general Australia has a healthy degree of respect for quality and achievement from wherever it emanates. High-quality researchers across many disciplines view young, regional and technical universities as viable places to base productive and intense research careers.

They are often seeking a balance between work and lifestyle, fresh or nimble workplaces, or are attracted to specialisms that young universities have cultivated as a consequence of being relatively fleet-footed.



RMIT in Melbourne: one of Australia's 16 best young universities. AAP

Public subsidy and a robust regulatory environment

Third, and perhaps most influential, has been what the THE rankings editor, Phil Baty, has described as "a richer and more diverse university mix" produced by the relatively flat playing field that has prevailed in Australia since the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s.

We have had a regulated, limited number of institutions and a long period of consistent, if constrained, public subsidy base. From this Australia has been able to steadily foster new, high-quality universities of diverse sorts, in diverse locations – without completely opening up the sector to a “long tail” of sub-standard, non-research-intensive (dare I say, American-style) college institutions.

Deregulation - or renewed public investment for dispersed excellence?

All this again raises the substance and relevance of the drawn-out higher education deregulation debate.

The rankings results expose the weakness in arguments in support of deregulation: that a system of dispersed universities somehow hampers capacity to climb ranks, generate diversity or achieve critical mass sufficient for excellence.

Australian universities are already among the absolute top ranks in a host of disciplines, as QS subject ranking results show. They have done so without the phenomenal benefactors present in the United States.

And more to the point, a well-regulated, stable, publicly subsidised higher education system has produced consistency, diversity and quality just about everywhere else in the system too.

Australia has a substantive, consistent and diffuse knowledge estate of profound benefit to the nation. We should not think of it as a cost or a drain on resources. We need debate about funding reform - but it must also be about why sustained public investment is worth it, and the benefits of an overall robust research landscape.



Northern Ireland

Times Higher Education Rankings